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Small Business Column

Making the jump from workhorse to leader

Stever Robbins

Your company is growing. You've now got a staff to do the work you used to do yourself, but you've been the company workhorse for so long you don't know how to steer the reins or drive the team.

While you will always have work you need to produce and manage yourself, it's your ability to delegate responsibility and lead others that contributes most to your company's long-term success. Becoming an entrepreneurial leader isn't easy, but these four steps will help:

1. Provide direction for people at the company.

Providing direction is the heart of leadership. Call it vision, strategy, mission or whatever. What's important is that you know your company's direction and communicate it relentlessly. Know the customer you serve and how you make their world better. Then make sure everyone in your company shares lives, eats and breathes that knowledge.

Direction is just before-the-fact decision-making. With direction, you can trust people to move the company forward without involving you at every step. Knowing the market, they can determine which alliances to pursue and what distribution will lead to success. Understanding the value your company provides, they can sift through opportunities and pursue those that will lead to prosperity.

2. Become a walking model of your desired values.

In a one-room shop, people know right from wrong by picking up cues from everyone else. But growth means more decisions are being made, often with conflicting ideas about what are, and aren't, priorities.

Leaders must set values. This means providing employees with answers to such essential questions as "What's important?" "What isn't?" and "How should trade-offs be settled?" But it also means living out those values. Because people watch actions, not words, leaders need to practice what they preach.

The CEO of a software company was famous for shipping products of dubious quality to make his quarterly numbers. He announced to a room of grateful employees that going forward, quality was No. 1. Two weeks later, he OK'd the shipment of a product known to be defective, just to hit a market opportunity. His actions said eloquently that quality just didn't matter.

3. Be consistent with your direction and your values.

Young companies are famous for being nimble and navigating changing markets. But after a couple of years, people start to burn out -- they begin looking for stability, and leaders can provide that, even when the outside world is chaos.

Leaders must bring stability to their vision and values. It's tricky to be stable and still respond to change, but too much change makes a leader look wishy-washy and fickle.

The good news is that keeping consistent values is easy. Values manifest in our choices and behavior. They rarely change over time and require no conscious thought. As long as your espoused values match your actions, consistency will be easy.

The bad news is that consistent direction in a changing world is damn hard. One solution is choosing a direction general enough to allow flexibility while still providing guidance. An architectural firm whose vision is "We design the world's best postmodern auditoriums" is asking for trouble. Styles change, and

someday post-postmodern will be in. A more flexible vision could still provide strong direction: "We design physical spaces to help unite communities."

4. Connect strongly with people.

As organizations get bigger, people have less and less direct contact with the original team, vision and energy. New hires have a more "9 to 5" mentality, where commitment is shallow at best. Leaders must start going into the organization and truly connecting with the staff. This isn't about physical connection; you don't have to be out there giving them back rubs. You need to create an emotional connection to build a strong organization.

You create emotional connections many ways. One way is through shared values. If you have strong values and live them, hiring people who share those values will start the connection forming. You can also spend time understanding what people are good at and arranging moments for them to shine. Far from needing money to be motivated, most people welcome the freedom to show off what they can do best. Your job is to provide them with the forum and the opportunity.

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